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ABSTRACT

In the years since the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Senate Confirmation hearings, it is apparent that this event has had some far-reaching consequences. Although the immediate outcome of the Senate hearings was not positive for Professor Hill, the effect of her testimony seems to have been to encourage more discussion of sexual harassment. The effects of the emotionality of the victim and aggressor, as well as the time period between the sexual harassment incidents and the filing of the official complaint on perceptions of guilt and credibility, were examined in this analogue vignette study. It was hypothesized that with increased emotionality of the victim, and decreased emotionality of the defendant and one month since the alleged harassment, the defendant would be more likely to be judged guilty, to receive more severe punishment when judged guilty, and to be perceived as less believable. It was also predicted that the victim would be perceived as more credible under such conditions. One hundred fifty-five undergraduates heard an audiotape of simulated university committee hearing in which a male professor was accused of sexual harassment by a female student. When the victim was highly emotional and when the victim and defendant's level of emotionality did not match, the defendant was perceived more negatively. A six-month delay in reporting the harassment incident to the committee resulted in higher credibility ratings of the victim. The findings were related to the Hill/Thomas Senate confirmation hearings. (Author/BF)

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Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Revisited: Emotionality as a Necessary Component of Credibility

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Title: Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Revisited: Emotionality as a Necessary Component of Credibility

Program Subject Index: 56 - Women's Studies

Abstract

One hundred fifty-five undergraduates heard an audiotape of a simulated university committee hearing in which a male professor was accused of sexual harassment by a female student. When the victim was highly emotional and when the victim and defendant's level of emotionality did not match, the defendant was perceived more negatively. A six-month delay in reporting the harassment incident to the committee resulted in higher credibility ratings of the victim. The findings were related to the Hill/Thomas Senate confirmation hearings.

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Statement of Problem:

In the year since the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Senate Confirmation hearings, it is apparent that this event has had some far-reaching consequences. For example, part of the impetus for the so-called "Year of the Political Woman" can be attributed to a sense of outrage which developed against the all-white middle-aged male Senate committee conducting the hearings. In addition, although the immediate outcome of the Senate hearings was not positive for Professor Hill, the effect of her testimony seems to have been to encourage more discussion of sexual harassment, and at least initially, to produce more caution on the part of potential harassers. Recently, for example, several sexual harassment allegations have surfaced against Senator Packwood of Oregon. Sexual harassment has also become a popular talk show topic, reflecting the interest of the country in the topic area. Finally newspaper accounts (e.g. N.Y. Times, 1992) suggest that attitudes towards the Hill-Thomas hearings have changed since last year with more people expressing a belief in the credibility of Professor Hill now than directly following the hearings.

Although definitional and incidence studies related to sexual harassment have been conducted (e.g. Fitzgerald & Ormerod,1991; Brooks & Perot, 1991), and some more experimental studies have

investigated relevant factors in sexual harassment settings (e.g. Thomann & Wiener, 1987), issues involving perceptions of guilt and credibility in sexual harassment hearings have not been studied. The present experiment used dimensions that appeared to be relevant to the Hill-Thomas case. The effects of the emotionality of the victim and aggressor, as well as the time period between the sexual harassment incidents and the filing of the official complaint on perceptions of guilt and credibility, were studied in an analogue vignette study.

It was hypothesized that with increased emotionality of the victim, and decreased emotionality of the defendant, and one month since the alleged harassment, the defendant would be more likely to be judged guilty, to receive more severe punishment when judged guilty, and to be perceived as less believable. It also was predicted that the victim would be perceived as more credible in the above conditions.

Subjects:

Eighty-two female and 73 male students in introductory psychology courses served as subjects in this experiment. Mean age of the group was 23.4. A 2 (emotional vs. nonemotional victim) x 2 (emotional vs. nonemotional professor) x 2 (one month vs. six months since the alleged harassment) design was used. Subjects were randomly assigned to each of the eight conditions.

Materials and Measures:

The alleged sexual harassment accusation was presented as a

simulated audiotape of a college hearing. The case, a combination of actual real-life harassment incidents, was a modified form of a transcript previously used in a study by the authors. In the audiotape a female student described how she was sexually harassed by her professor while consulting with him on an independent study project. She stated that the professor asked her out shortly after she began working with him. After she said no, his remarks became increasingly sexual. The student's attempts to keep the relationship professional did not succeed, and she finally approached the University Committee on Sexual Harassment. The professor stated that the incidents never occurred. In his defense, the professor attacked the student, accused her of having sexual fantasies, and of being unbalanced. He also stated that he had a very good reputation at the university. In the emotional condition, the victim began to cry during her testimony and emitted other vocal cues of distress. The same testimony was presented in a straightforward manner in the nonemotional victim condition. In the emotional defendant condition, the professor became angry and loud in his presentation as compared with the nonemotional condition. The original audiotape was pilot tested to insure that the emotional manipulations were accurately perceived.

Some of the subjects heard an audiotape version which stated that the harassment had occurred one month earlier. Other subjects heard a version in which the victim stated that she had waited six months to appeal to the committee because she did not want to affect her grade. In this condition, the victim stated that she

had received an accurate grade in the independent study course. Aside from the manipulated variables, all other information in the audiotapes remained the same.

After listening to the audiotape,the subjects judged the professor as guilty or not guilty, rated how severe his punishment should be if guilty, indicated how responsible the victim and defendant were for the original harassment, and responded to a question about the fairness of the trial. Subjects also rated the credibility of the professor and student on a list of adjectives using a seven-point Likert-type scale. The adjectives used as dependent measures of credibility (with their opposites) were "believable", "convincing" and "likely to lie." The credibility items were embedded among other adjectives. Additional questions were included as manipulation checks.

Procedure:

After signing an informed consent form, subjects were asked to imagine that they were members of a University Committee on Sexual Harassment. Subjects first listened to the audiotapes, and then were allowed five minutes to read a transcript of the hearing proceedings to permit clarification. Following completion of the dependent measures, subjects were debriefed. Subjects were run in small groups ranging from 3-14.

Results:

In general, the manipulation checks showed that subjects rated the conditions accurately, perceiving both emotionality and time of reporting as intended. Most subjects (71%) found the defendant

guilty.

In accordance with predictions relating to the variable of emotionality of the victim, the MANOVA dealing with how severely the defendant should be punished, if guilty, achieved a probability level of .016 (Wilks' Lambda = .92, F(2,112) = 4.30). When the victim was emotional, the defendant was punished more severely.

An interaction effect was obtained between the victim's level of emotionality and the defendant's level of emotionality. The defendant was seen as more likely to be guilty if the emotional levels did not match, that is, when one was emotional and the other was not, (For the MANOVA, Wilks' Lambda = .95, F(2,112) = 2.86, p = .062; Univariate F = 5.68, p = .019.)

The variable of time of reporting produced an effect on perceived credibility of the victim, (Wilks' Lambda = .95, F(2,112) = 2.61, p = .054). Of the three credibility adjectives, the significant difference was obtained on believability. The victim was seen as more believable when there was a six month delay in reporting the harassment incident, (F = 5.69, p = .018.)

Conclusions:

In general, there was a high percentage of guilty judgments in this simulated hearings study. This high proportion of perceived guilt could be due to the impact of more negative impressions of Clarence Thomas, and more positive perceptions of Anita Hill now as compared with initial reactions, at least as reported in the media. It also is possible, as in all simulated research, that a higher proportion of guilty judgments may be a result of decisions

without real-life consequences for the defendant.

Emotionality, as predicted, was important to decisions about the severity of punishment and guilt. This finding is consistent with the initial public perceptions of the Anita Hill - Clarence Thomas hearings. Anita Hill was judged more negatively partly because some viewers thought her testimony was cool and unemotional. This result also relates to findings of simulated jury rape studies in which the credibility of the rape victim was enhanced when she was emotional in her testimony. Public stereotyped views seem to require some type of distress expressed by a victim, indicating some psychological damage before she is believed.

The result that the victim was more believable when there was a six-month delay was opposite to predictions. One interpretation of this pattern is that a fairly convincing justification for the six month delay was given along with the statement that the student victim was satisfied with her grade. No comparable justification was included for the one-month situation , possibly inadvertently producing more positive results for the six-month condition. This variable should be investigated further since delay in reporting was certainly raised as an issue in the Anita Hill setting, and has also been emphasized in other situations.

The significant interaction indicating increased guilty judgments when the victim and alleged harasser's emotional levels did not match, partially supported the hypothesis. When the victim was emotional, her credibility, as indicated above, may have been

enhanced particularly in contrast to the defendant's flat unemotional tone which may have been perceived as noncaring. When the professor was emotional (i.e. angry and yelling), this condition may have produced a backlash effect resulting in more sympathy for the victim, and consequently increased guilty perceptions of the defendant. If both the victim and aggressor were unemotional, subjects may have concluded that nothing damaging had occurred. Finally, when both the victim and defendant were emotional, the credibility of the victim may have decreased because the salience of the victim's emotionality was lessened.

The results of the present study suggest that perceptions of sexual harassment adversarial situations are relatively complex, but that certainly emotionality, particularly of the victim, is an important factor affecting judgments. Sexual harassment continues to be an important issue in the country, and additional parameters in this social context should be investigated to facilitate the development of better procedures for sexual harassment hearings.

References

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Table 1

Mean Punishment Severity Ratings

Time of Reporting

		One Month		Six Months	
		Defendant Emotional	Defendant Not Emotional	Defendant Emotional	Defendant Not Emotional
Victim Emotionality	High	3.50	3.63	3.82	3.08
	Low	2.69	3.17	3.07	2.87